DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 178 FL 026 030

AUTHOR Reedy, Sean
TITLE An Intercultural Approach to Recognizing and Responding to Japanese University Students' Attitudes towards Testing.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (33rd, New York, NY, March 9-13, 1999) under the title, "Recognizing and Responding to Cultural Learning Styles."
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; College Faculty; College Students; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cross Cultural Training; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Language Teachers; Language Tests; Second Language Instruction; Sociocultural Patterns; *Student Attitudes; Surveys; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Testing; *Textbooks
IDENTIFIERS Japan; Japanese People

ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the attitudes of Japanese university students and their non-Japanese university teachers toward testing and the use of textbooks in their English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom. Subjects were 120 students and 13 native English-speaking instructors at 3 Japanese universities. Results reveal a gap in attitudes between the two subject groups, consistent with historical research into the role of testing in Japanese education and non-Japanese educators' perceptions of that role. It is argued that this gap can be bridged partially through an intercultural approach that seeks first to identify and then respond to socio-historical facets of students' approaches to the mastery of language learning. Using this approach, the teacher can create pedagogical strategies that draw on the intrinsic strengths of students' learning attitudes, styles, and approaches. The questionnaires are appended. (Contains 11 references.) (MSE)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 435 178

An Intercultural Approach to Recognizing and Responding to Japanese University Students' Attitudes towards Testing

(Paper first presented at the March 1999 TESOL Conference in New York City under the title: Recognizing and Responding to Cultural Learning Styles)

Sean Reedy
Associate Professor
Maebashi Institute of Technology

This paper presents the results of a survey of Japanese university students and their non-Japanese university teachers' attitudes towards testing and the use of textbooks in the English as a foreign language classroom. The results of the data reveal a gap in attitudes towards testing and the use of textbooks between the two subject groups. The results are consistent with historical research into the role of testing in Japanese education as well as with current research into non-Japanese educators' perceptions of the role of testing within the Japanese educational system. The author argues that this gap can be partially bridged through an intercultural approach that seeks first to identify and then respond to sociohistorical facets of students' approaches to the mastery of language learning. Through an attempt at understanding the sociohistorical roots of students' learning experiences, the teacher can create pedagogical strategies that draw on the intrinsic strengths of students' learning attitudes, styles, and approaches.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sean Reedy
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

FL026030

Introduction

A survey of the literature covering the Japanese educational system from the Meiji Period (Cummings, 1980; Rohlen, 1983) to the late 1990's (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999) reveals the pervasive role of testing not only within the formal Japanese educational system but also within many other facets of Japanese culture, such as the traditional arts, sports, and music. The attainment of discrete levels of competency based on standardized tests has been a key component of the Japanese students' learning history. Although testing has been a pervasive component of the Japanese learning system, many educators, both Japanese and non-Japanese alike, have criticized the examination "culture" in Japan. Rohlen (1983) , for example, writes: "Excessive concern with exams has been highlighted as a major national problem" (p. 82).Other educators, notably Brown (1995), have challenged the validity and reliability of testing instruments in Japan. A number of Japanese educators have joined the chorus of criticism against the excessive emphasis on examinations in Japan. The prominent educator Takamitsu Sawa (1999), studying recent trends in academic performance in Japan, asks: "Why has the scholastic ability of students declined? One is the anti-intellectual trend that swept this nation since the mid-1970's. The other lies in the system of university entrance examinations" (p.20). While these critical studies have offered incisive insights into the many shortcomings of testing in Japan, they have not shed much light on Japanese students' attitudes towards testing. The general aim of this paper was to approach the issue of testing from the perspective of the learner. The purpose of this study was two-fold: to compare current attitudes of Japanese students towards testing and the use of textbooks in the classroom with those of their non-Japanese teachers; and to present an intercultural model based on recognizing and responding to facets of cultural attitudes and approaches to learning . This approach sees cultural learning strategies and approaches as rooted in sociohistorical factors (Cathcart & Cathcart, 1997, Porter and Samovar, 1997; Russell, 1999).

Method

One hundred and twenty universities students from three Japanese universities responded to a survey assessing their attitudes towards testing and the use of textbooks in their English classes (Appendix A). The three universities represented a range of academic competitiveness--a highly competitive private university, a moderately competitive public university, and a comparatively non-competitive private university (Monbusho, 1999). Because the survey involved a convenience sample, rather than a stratified random sample of learners, the results can not be statistically extrapolated to a general Japanese university student population (a limitation the author duly acknowledges). Though statistical inferences may be difficult to draw from the study, the data, nonetheless, represent a large population sample and a broad cross section of
university learners in Japan.

The variables controlled for were class size, type of class, and hours of instruction. The mean age of the sample was slightly over nineteen years old (19.2). All of the students were enrolled in one-semester, four-skills, lower-intermediate level English courses. Classes met for one ninety-minute session per week an average of 14 weeks, or an average of 21 hours per semester. The identical survey (written in both Japanese and English) was given to the 13 non-Japanese lecturers and professors of the students surveyed. Seven of the teachers were from the United States, four were from England, and two from Canada. The mean age of the teachers was forty three, and the mean number of years teaching in Japan was 11.4.

Results

The following table summarizes the data comparing Japanese students' attitudes to those of their English language teachers.

Table 1. Attitudes of Japanese University Students and their Non-Japanese teachers' attitudes towards Testing and the Use of Textbooks in English Classes

(Based on a 5 point Likert Scale with 1 indicating strong agreement and 5 indicating strong disagreement)

Statement	Japanese students (sample size 120 students).	non-Japanese teachers (sample size: 13 teachers)
Teachers should base tests solely on material covered in class.	*Agreement (2.24)*	*Disagreement (4.4)*
Teachers should tell students before the test exactly what material students should know for the test	*Strong agreement (1.49)*	*Strong disagreement (4.7)*
Teachers should test students only on material covered in the textbook.	*Agreement (2.29)*	*Strong disagreement (4.55)*
Number of tests teachers should give per semester:	*1.75*	*.8*
Percentage of a student's final grade that should be based on in-class tests:	56%	*22%*

The data suggests an inverse relationship between the teachers and their students with respect to attitudes towards testing and the use of textbooks in the classroom. Japanese students generally agreed with the statement that tests should be based entirely on material covered in class, while their foreign teachers generally disagreed. Students strongly agreed with the statement that teachers should explicitly tell students what to expect on tests; whereas, their foreign teachers strongly disagreed with the statement. Japanese university students showed general agreement with the statement that tests should be based on textbook material, whereas their teachers expressed strong disagreement. Japanese learners felt teachers should test them roughly twice as much as that advocated by their teachers. Japanese students felt that a much larger percentage of their final grade should be based on tests than did their foreign teachers.

Discussion

The results clearly demonstrate a wide gap in attitudes between the subject groups towards the importance of testing in the classroom and the role of textbooks and their relationship to testing and grading. Based on a number of historical studies of the Japanese educational system, the results are not particularly unexpected and have a kind of face validity. They are consistent with much historical research concerning the integral and pervasive nature of testing in the Japanese system from the Meiji Period to the present (Hane, 1986; Russell, 1999). The attitudes of Japanese students are deeply connected to their notion of achievement, which places significant emphasis on the attainment of discrete levels or grades of proficiency measured by various forms of standardized tests. In attempting to explain the seemingly excessive emphasis on testing in Japan, Rohlen (1983) argues, "It must also be recognized that the Japanese are a highly achievement oriented people who have long been encouraged to view education as a crucial avenue for personal advancement. A potent mixture results when the Japanese national character responds to the sharply drawn system of incentives and penalties presented by postwar education" (p. 93).

Student attitudes towards testing in Japan are deeply connected to their sense of personal achievement, historically tied to their attitudes towards social and economic advancement, and deeply rooted in the Japanese educational experience. A least two generalizations pertinent to this study can be gleaned from a survey of the historical and sociological research concerning the Japanese learner. The first is an expectation of

the teacher as an expert purveyor of the subject matter; the second is a desire to demonstrate mastery of the subject matter through the attainment of a specific level or rank of proficiency. These may be described as facets of Japanese students' learning history, not to be confused with *learning styles* as defined in the literature of applied linguistics (Stefani, 1995).

Implications for Language learning: A Sociohistorical and Intercultural Approach to Recognizing and Responding to Cultural and Approaches towards Learning

What follows is a brief description of an intercultural approach towards bridging gaps in learning attitudes and/or approaches between teachers and their learners in the foreign language classroom. The sample approach introduced below specifically relates to Japanese university learners' attitudes towards testing and the use of textbooks in the classroom and was piloted by the researcher in a 2nd year English course. The approach may serve as an intercultural model or template for identifying and responding to facets of students' attitudes and approaches to language learning. It should be pointed out that the approach is much more dynamic than that suggested by the step by step process outlined below.

Summary of Piloted Intercultural Approach to Learners' Attitudes Towards Learning in the EFL Classroom

During the first class of the first semester in April 1997, the teacher gave students a needs assessment survey in both English and the L1 language. (See Appendix B for a sample needs assessment questionnaire).

The teacher discovered the students expressed a purpose for learning English different from that which he had expected. The teacher assumed the students would be interested in improving their oral communication skills; the survey results, however, suggested students were more interested in passing standardized English tests.

The teacher attempted to confirm the results of the survey, spending one class session asking students in their native language why they wanted to pass a standard English test (which the teacher incidentally had no particular interest in teaching). Students informed the teacher that the said test, EIKEN (English Step Test), was helpful in securing gainful employment. Some students told the teacher that they had taken the test a number of times and would like to improve their scores.

The teacher did some background reading on the historical role of testing in the Japanese educational system.

The student feedback posed a pedagogical conflict for the teacher. The teacher questioned the validity and reliability of the EIKEN test and disliked its emphasis on discrete grammar points. However, as a result of his consultations with his students and his awareness of the importance of standardized tests in Japan, the teacher decided to incorporate an EIKEN preparation component into his class.

The teacher came up with an action plan combining his pedagogical orientation with the students' needs. The teachers decided to teach a skills-based language course using the EIKEN preparation textbook as the main course textbook. At the beginning of each ninety minute lesson, the teacher introduced one listening or reading skill, such as listening for gist, listening for key words, reading for the main idea, and scanning for discrete information. After introducing the skill, students practiced taking parts of the EIKEN, which were then graded. Difficult vocabulary and grammar items were reviewed and explained.

A mutual accommodation was reached that neither compromised the teacher's beliefs nor ignored the students' learning needs and attitudes towards testing.

At the completion of the course the students were given a questionnaire to elicit their feedback and opinions of the course.

Wider Applications and Implications for Learning

The above intercultural approach can be applied to other instances in which the teacher comes to realize through an active engagement with the students' culture(s) and their historical learning history that a gap exists between his/her attitudes towards learning and those of the students.

The approach need not be limited to Japanese learners, nor need it necessarily be limited to the language learning classroom. Ideally, this approach is transferable to any language-culture, though admittedly it might be more practically applied to homogeneous language classes rather than to heterogeneous ones. Other applications of the above approach might help teachers reach an accommodation with students who tend to rely on rote memorization techniques, another learning approach that is seen by many educators as sociohistorically rooted in the Japanese learning experience (Russell, 1999).

A summary of the steps in this process can be culled from the above piloted approach.

- Find out what the students want to learn in the class, what their aims and expectations are of the class. This can be done, for example, through a short needs analysis questionnaire.

- If the teacher discovers a disparity between the learners and the teachers' learning attitudes, aims, approaches, or expectations, attempt to find out why. This can be done, in part, by attempting to gain an understanding of the contemporary learning environment of the student, for example, by observing elementary or secondary school classes in the students' cultural setting. One might also spend time reading about the sociohistorical roots of the learning experience of the L1 culture.

- Attempt to construct strategies that take advantage of the strengths of the students' culturally influenced learning aims, attitudes, and strategies

- Devise a course (or curriculum) action plan that combines the strengths of the students' learning preferences and approaches with those of the teachers' pedagogical principles and strategies.

- Elïcit feedback on the success of the strategy at the end of the course and make further modifications to the course.

Conclusion

This paper offered an intercultural approach to recognizing and responding to attitudes and approaches towards learning, one that can be extended to other cultural settings and age groups. The paper began with a simple assumption: teachers and students who come from different cultures come to the classroom with different purposes for learning, different attitudes towards aspects of learning, and varying approaches or strategies towards effective learning. An intercultural approach seeks first to gain a greater degree of understanding of the sociohistorical roots of the learning aims and attitudes of the students; second, to see strengths rather than weaknesses in culturally rooted facets of learning; and third, to devise a pedagogical strategy that integrates these strengths into the classroom learning environment . Ideally, a balance is reached that neither disregards the learners' history nor compromises the teacher's pedagogical principles and approaches.

References

Cathcart, D. & Cathcart, R. (1998). "The Group: A Japanese Context." In L.A. Samovar and R.E. Porter (Eds.). Intercultural Communication (eighth edition), 329-339. New York: Wadsworth Publishing.

Brown, J.D. (1993)."Language Test Hysteria in Japan?" *The Language Teacher*, Vol. XVII, No. 12, 41-43.

Cummings, W.K. (1980). Education and equality in Japan. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hane, M. (1986). Modern Japan: A historical survey. Boulder, CO: Westview Press

Okano, K. and Tsuchiya, M. (1999). Education in contemporary Japan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mombusho (1999). Japanese colleges and universities, 1997-1999. Tokyo: Monbusho.

Porter, R.E. and Samovar, L.A. (1997). "An Introduction to Intercultural Communication." In R.E. Porter and L.A. Samovar (Eds.), Intercultural communication.5-26. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Rohlen, T. (1983). Japan's high schools. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Russell, N.U. (1998). "The Kumon approach to teaching and learning." In T. Rohlen and G. Letendre (Eds.) Teaching and learning in Japan. 248-274. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sawa, T. "Cramming Cripples Japan." (1999 October 18). The Japan Times, p. 20.

Stefani, L.A. (1998). "The influence of culture on classroom communication." In R.E. Porter and L.A. Samovar (Eds.), Intercultural communication. 349-362. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Appendix A

ATTITUDES TOWARDS TESTING AND THE USE OF TEXTBOOKS IN EFL CLASSES IN JAPAN

We would like to ask you for your views on testing and textbooks in your university English classes. Please circle the number that best expresses your opinion.

当大学の英語の授業でのテストや教材について、あなたの意見を聞かせて下さい。あなたの考えをもっとも適切に表現している番号に、マルをつけて下さい。

1. English teachers should give only one test per semester.
① テストは学期につき、一回だけであるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

2. English teachers should give at least one mid term and one final exam per semester.
② テストは学期につき、少なくとも中間と学期末と2回あるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

3. English teachers should give tests more than twice a semester.
③ テストは学期につき、2回以上あるべきだ.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

4. English teachers should give tests as often as possible, ideally after every lesson.
④ テストはできうる限り頻繁に、理想的には毎授業後にあるべきだ.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

5. English teachers should not give any tests during the semester.
⑤ テストはあるべきでない。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

6. How many tests do you think English teachers should give every semester? (Circle one)
⑥ テストは学期につき、何回行なわれるべきか？ [一つにマル]

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more
(0回) (1回) (2回) (3回) (4回) (5回) (6回) (7回) (8回、それ以上)

7. English teachers should test me only on material that was covered by the teacher in class.
⑦ テストは、授業でやった内容からのみ出題されるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

8. English teachers should tell us before the test exactly what material we must know for the test.
⑧ 学生はテスト前に、どの範囲が出題されるのか、正確に知らされるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

9. English teachers should test us only on material covered in our textbooks..
⑨ テストは、テキストで扱う内容からのみ、出題されるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

10. English teachers should finish all of the units in a textbook..
⑩ テキストの全ての章を終わらせるべきだ。

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly agree agree no opinion disagree strongly disagree
1 2 3 4 5
全くそのとおりだ そのとおりだ どちらとも言えない そうは思わない 全くそう思わない

11. English teachers should teach selected units from the textbook.
⑪ テキストから章をえらんで、それを授業でやるべきだ。

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5
全くそのとおりだ	そのとおりだ	どちらとも言えない	そうは思わない	全くそう思わない

12. English teachers should not use a textbook in class.
⑫ テキストは使うべきでない。

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5
全くそのとおりだ	そのとおりだ	どちらとも言えない	そうは思わない	全くそう思わない

13. About what percentage of your final grade do you think should be based on tests?

⑬ 成績の何パーセントくらいが、テストに基づいてつけられるべきだと思うか?

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	agree	no opinion	disagree	strongly disagree
1	2	3	4	5
全くそのとおりだ	そのとおりだ	どちらとも言えない	そうは思わない	全くそう思わない

1	2	3	4	5
0%	25%	50%	75%	100%
(① 0%)	(② 25%)	(3 50%)	(④ 75%)	(5 100%)

Appendix B

Associate Professor Sean Reedy　前橋工科大学

(助教授 リーディ ショーン)　Student ID (学籍番号) #_____

Questionnaire: **LEARNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY**

(アンケート: 授業の為の希望調査)

What would you like to learn the most in this class? Please rate the following on a scale from 1 (the thing you want to learn about the most) to 10 (the thing you want to learn about the least)?

(あなたがこの授業でもっとも勉強したいことは何ですか？以下の項目に 1 から 10 までの順位を付けて答えて下さい。『1』が一番したいこと、『10』が一番したくないことです。又、他にも授業でやりたいことや取り上げてほしい話題、伸ばしたい技能があれば具体的にあげて下さい。)

_____ I want to improve my English conversation ability.
(英会話能力を伸ばしたい。)

_____ I want to improve my score on the TOEIC or TOEFL test.
(トーイックテストやトーフルテストの点を上げたい。)

_____ I want to improve my English vocabulary.
(語彙力をつけたい。)

_____ I want to learn how to use e-mail in English.
(英語でEメールを使いたい。)

_____ I want to improve my English grammar.
(文法力をつけたい。)

_____ I want help preparing for the English Step test.
(英検のための勉強をしたい。)

_____ I want to improve my reading ability.
(英語の読解力をつけたい。)

_____ I want to learn English words related to my major.
(自分の学科に関係した英単語を勉強したい。)

_____ I want to learn how to use the Internet in English.
(英語でインターネットを使いたい。)

_____ I want to improve my English pronunciation ability.
(英語の発音を良くしたい。)

_____ Other. Please indicate below (その他。具体的にあげてください。)